

Water Fight: corporate bottom line versus foes of privatization and plasticization

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I felt oddly guilty being on the inside with major corporados when outside the grassroots activists were demonstrating on San Francisco's waterfront. The coverage of the conflict in that day's Chronicle was extensive, but interestingly did not mention the location (the Hyatt Regency) or even the name of the conference: Corporate Water Footprinting.

No doubt it's a sensitive issue. Attendees represented the likes of General Electric, Nestle Waters, J.P. Morgan, Coca-Cola, IBM, Dean Foods, Intel, Miller-Coors, Pepsi, and more -- no strangers to occasional opposition and fury from the public. Yet, they were calm and at home, as if what they do (to the planet) for a respectable job must now include new ways of doing business -- such as possible truth-in-labeling on consumer products with water-use disclosure.

The purpose of the meeting was to share corporate experiences and strategies on water conservation (efficiency), especially as regards the carbon footprint. Climate change was not something dismissed or resisted, but treated as a given that implied greater concentration of corporate resources as years go on. While measurements and compliance (mostly voluntary) are undertaken with the zeal that billions of dollars and huge staffs can muster, the approach to water vis-a-vis climate change is still in its infancy. The ConAgra executive wondered who is to get credited for reducing greenhouse gases when agriculture uses less electricity (as water is conserved), if the electric power utility could claim the green savings instead.

I did not see how water supplies provided with petroleum-energy would be met by energy-alternatives in the event of sudden, extreme curtailment. I asked a panel about this and got little in the way of useful response.

With corporations knowing they need to have a "water portfolio" of sources in the coming age of water scarcity, when one source for water would be precarious, a scramble for supplies is inevitable if the consumer economy goes on much longer. So, it was a sincere question when the Coca-Cola executive asked a panel for help in "overcoming people's squeamishness about drinking treated sewage." Hope was offered when it was pointed out that people commonly re-use hotel pillows without complaint, for example, so we must accept recycled water to drink.

I was a speaker on a panel on Dec. 3 at the two-day meeting put on by GreenPower Conferences. The two days were packed with intense briefings and presentations, interspersed with lively discussion. This was not an interactive meeting of CEOs and concerned shareholders, and activists were limited to a few "safe" nonprofit conservation groups (except for one that was helpful enough to set the stage for my exposing the non-solution of bioplastics). So there was no debate all day about the ethics of expanding corporate interests at the expense of the ecosystem or poor people. I missed the first day, when former Environmental Protection Agency administrator William Reilly spoke.

Until relatively recently all humanity freely used and conserved the pristine waters of the world without charge; this must mean we were "poor." Now that the dwindling supply of fresh, clean water is in such high demand due primarily to population growth, corporate strategies to corner the market and advertise the false need for bottled water are finding success. Corporations would remake the world. But the volatility of privatization, or capitalistic exploitation of a necessity of life, is always near; Bolivians had to face violence to expel from their country Bechtel Corporation for such behavior regarding privatized water, and a major result is the the indigenous leader, Evo Morales.

There was little or no discussion about such issues at the conference, and this was one reason I was glad to attend as an observer and to soak up some corporate culture (it had been a long time). It worked out that I could attend without paying over one thousand dollars for the conference registration, by becoming a late addition on a panel. I was selected to chair it, to my surprise, but ended up ceding that role to an Environmental Protection Agency water issues manager named Bob Rose. This gave me the chance to lay out my positions with his helpful questions, such as how my background at Lundberg Survey was relevant to my present work. I said,

I'll tell you what I've done over the decades and what I do now so you can better understand where I'm coming from. First, Culture Change is not based on the business-consulting concept of culture change for maximizing profits. Instead, our name refers to the self-defeating tendency our society has, for example, to pave over the best farmland.

I was an oil industry analyst who used my knowledge to start a nonprofit environmental group. We've advocated and used direct action, and helped ban plastic shopping bags in such places as San Francisco. The plastic plague is a disaster for human health and for our oceans, is non-biodegradable, and is made from petroleum.

In 1979 the firm I formerly ran -- I have nothing to do with Lundberg Survey today -- predicted the Second Oil Shock. Because we have now seen the global peak in oil extraction, we are set up for an event to trigger mass panic buying and hoarding. When people cannot drive to their jobs, and the trucks don't come into Safeway [a Safeway executive was in the room], then we will see economic collapse beyond the financial-meltdown variety. As to present price levels of oil and fuels, they don't offer a possible return to consumption as before, with some repeating business cycle following supply and demand. Rather, we are seeing lowered prices as part of collapse caused largely by the huge run up in oil prices in recent years. So, lower prices are not going to be affordable for people without jobs.

I address you as human beings and not corporations. I advise you to think of the future as belonging to local economies with decentralized energy technology. Overall there's no substitute for petroleum. Water supplies are extremely dependent on energy, being pumped primarily with dwindling petroleum. So what will you do? What is ahead is collapse of the global economy that has been based on cheap oil. What's coming is not something I prefer, nor is the future going to necessarily be what you prefer. We're in a fast changing world. We have a consulting arm to advise the unthinkable regarding growth -- an end to it -- so we advise personal change in lifestyle to cope with the unfolding crisis, no matter what the corporate policy may be.

It was strange, after so long, again being around corporate strategists presenting their agribusiness/megafinancing know-how. It was somewhat surreal to tell them what's around the corner (petrocollapse, decentralizing, local economics, eliminating plastic, sail transport) -- but I was better received at this time of financial meltdown than I would have been a year ago. I had no regrets about this experience, and am grateful for the opportunity presented by GreenPower Conferences. I hope I helped some participants.

I found out about the protest too late to catch more than the dispersal, but I made up for it by hobnobbing with the activists at a party later on at Food And Water Watch. This impressive group has the advantage of not having to promote a "technofix" to the problems of corporatization of our food and water. I am particularly impressed with the group's campaign Take Back the Tap, intended to reverse the trend of bottled water (which does not have higher standards, usually, than tap water).

Water use for semiconductor manufacturing is huge: the entire industry uses up to 60 billion gallons of water each year. Intel's presentation was backed up by J.P. Morgan's semiconductor specialist. One paradox for water and energy savings to reduce the carbon footprint lies in the fact that the land for the factories is expensive if near population centers, while those places are where the water is most abundant. So the factories are sited in more remote, drier places to save money on land (and save on wages?). The water has to be ultra pure or the manufacturing process can't work. So, for the purification and to make the water available in the dry locations, a huge amount of energy is required. The factories cannot be turned off arbitrarily for one moment, or else a long process is interrupted (such as in making bread), requiring it to be started over if there is an interruption of energy or water. Such an event at one major chip factory means hundreds of millions of dollars lost. East Asia factories were said to be the first to go down in future, as U.S. companies were judged more reliable. But the U.S. is not immune to energy shortages or running out of ultra pure water.

For the bottled water and soft drink industry, expansion of markets means going to dirty Third World cities' polluted, diminishing rivers. This is simply seen as a business challenge. Such attitudes were offset by one panel chairman's (Jeff Mosher's) stated concern regarding nano particles in eye make up, and flame retardant in pajamas, all ending up in the water supply. His interest comes from his position as a recycled water adviser at the National Water Research Institute, a group that has had a role in getting huge water users in southern California to use recycled water.

When one of the conference moderators, Gil Friend (Natural Logic consultant), looked at my business card, his comment on Sail Transport Network was, "The Chinese should be interested." "Why?" I asked. "Because they will need to ship their products with some kind of propulsion without oil." I had to admit I'd not thought of this, because I figured the amount of shipping would plummet to almost nothing without plentiful bunker fuel at an affordable cost. I may have wrongly assumed there would not be a major effort by China to somehow keep shipping products across oceans upon petrocollapse. In September a Chinese junk sailed to California without an engine, proving the possible and the beautiful (if slow).

I was most uncomfortable to be in the presence of the Nestle Waters executive. This company contributed to countless deaths of babies around the world by promoting infant formula used by mothers who added tainted water and did not use the safe method of breast feeding -- discouraged by Nestle. Now the corporation is buying watershed rights in the U.S. and elsewhere to take regions' entire water rights for more plastic water bottle business. I have a hard time imagining a more harmful and unfair business except for the much larger business of exporting armaments that are not really for self defense.

Neither was I happy to see the representative from Coca Cola. The existence of this pervasive product and the corporation's bottled water -- packaged, in toxic, non-biodegradable plastic made from petroleum -- proves people are quite willing to buy needless items and let the corporation keep growing at everyone's expense. Activism and advocacy are badly needed, as are dedicated public servants in government. But it must be a change in consciousness for modern humanity to appreciate that everyone has a right to clean water -- not just to pay for it if one can. Just as important is the responsibility we must all take for not wasting or polluting water; we are all downstream.

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Further reading and references:

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californiaprogressreport.com

"Businesses, watchdogs clash on water policies" by Kelly Zito, San Francisco Chronicle:

sfgate.com

Protest: statement from Maude Barlow, board chair of Food & Water Watch, founder of the Blue Planet Project, appointed as the first U.N. Senior Advisor on water issues:

foodandwaterwatch.org

"Coca-Cola's Latest Scam - Water Neutrality" by Amit Srivastava, Nov. 25, 2008:

indiaresource.org

Corporate Water Footprinting conference:

greenpowerconferences.com

Bolivian rejection of World Bank function:

foodandwaterwatch.org

National Water Research Institute:

nwri-usa.org

Natural Logic:

natlogic.com

Sail Transport Network:

sailtransportnetwork.com

"Blue Salon conference report: Oceans dying; Fresh water supply to plummet"

culturechange.org

Culture Change Letter #44, November 25, 2003, "Overpopulation's toll: Water privatization and the rising conflict":

culturechange.org/e-letter-water.html

"Corporate Water Footprinting" by Jan Lundberg:

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"Tap dreams: Who controls what we drink? Corporate water comes to (and from) San Francisco" by Amanda Witherell, Dec. 10, 2008, San Francisco Bay Guardian:

sfbg.com